

PHILIPPINES 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free exercise of religion and religious worship and prohibits the establishment of a state religion. The law treats intentional attacks directed against religiously affiliated buildings or facilities as war crimes or crimes against international humanitarian law. The law forbids public officials from interrupting religious worship. In August, the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF) and Basilan Congressman Mujiv Hataman condemned the killing and burning of a Muslim businesswoman by a group that included police and civilians and urged the government to protect religious minorities following similar incidents in the past year. As part of the government's campaign against groups pursuing violent opposition to the state, particularly the Communist Party of the Philippines, some religious workers who were identified by the government as communist members or sympathizers were threatened and harassed. Religious groups, human rights groups, and private individuals filed 37 petitions before the Supreme Court questioning the constitutionality of the Antiterrorism Act of 2020, citing fears that it could lead to restraints in the free practice and free expression of their faith. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines and the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) expressed frustration with the pandemic-related government ban on religious gatherings during Holy Week while gyms and spas were allowed to remain open, with limited capacity. Church groups complained they were not consulted prior to the government's decision.

The government attributed several threats, attacks, and kidnappings in the south of the country to the Maute Group and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) – both of which are designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. government – the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), and other ISIS-related terrorist groups.

On January 24, unknown gunmen killed a Catholic priest in Malaybalay, Bukidnon Province. Violent incidents, particularly in rural areas in the south of the country where Muslims are the majority of the population, were frequently associated with interclan *rido* (feud) violence. Since religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, incidents were difficult to classify as solely based on religious identity. Several Muslim public figures stated that Muslims continued to face discrimination and human rights abuses in the country. Media reported in February that unknown individuals vandalized several Catholic churches in Lamitan City, Basilan Province.

The U.S. embassy conducted a broad range of engagement throughout the year with the government to highlight the importance of international religious freedom. Together with civil society organization partners, the embassy engaged local governments in the Lanao Region to invest in community learning facilities that served as venues for cooperation and inclusive dialogues, including religious freedom discourses. An embassy-sponsored project worked with local organizations in sensitizing community leaders about female empowerment from diverse perspectives, including religious and ethnic group viewpoints that encouraged tolerance and pluralism. In May, the embassy commemorated Ramadan with speakers from different faith-based traditions in Southeast Asia through a month-long, virtual dialogue series focused on reducing violent extremism related to religion within local communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 110.8 million (midyear 2021). According to the 2015 census conducted by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), 79.5 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 9 percent belong to other Christian groups, including Seventh-day Adventists, United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), United Methodists, Episcopal Church in the Philippines, Bible Baptist Church, other Protestant churches, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Other Christian groups include locally established churches such as the Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), Philippine Independent Church (Aglipayan or IFI), Members Church of God International, The Kingdom of Jesus Christ, and The Name above Every Name. Approximately 6 percent of the population is Muslim, according to the PSA, while the NCMF estimates 10 to 11 percent. The NCMF attributes its higher estimate to a number of factors, including the reluctance of Muslims to officially register with the civil registrar office or to participate in the formal survey; the community's transience due to internal movement for work; and the government's failure to survey Muslim areas and communities thoroughly. According to the PSA, approximately 4 percent of those surveyed in the 2015 census did not report a religious affiliation or belonged to other faiths, such as animism or indigenous syncretic faiths.

A majority of Muslims are members of various ethnic minority groups and reside in Mindanao and nearby islands in the south. Muslims constitute a majority in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Although most are practitioners of Sunni Islam, a small minority of Shia Muslims live in the provinces of Lanao del Sur and Zamboanga del Sur in Mindanao. An increasing

number of Muslims are migrating to the urban centers of Manila, Baguio, Dumaguete, Cagayan de Oro, Iligan, Cotabato, and Davao, a trend that accelerated after the May-October 2017 siege of Marawi during which local residents fled to other provinces for their security.

The indigenous groups in Mindanao are mostly located in geographically isolated areas. The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples reported 10.9 million indigenous peoples, situated in Mindanao, and reported that indigenous peoples primarily belong to various Christian groups, with a small percentage that are Muslim.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the free exercise of religion and religious worship and prohibits the establishment of a state religion. No religious test is required for the exercise of civil or political rights. The constitution provides for the separation of religion and state. The law treats intentional attacks directed against religiously affiliated buildings or facilities as war crimes or crimes against international humanitarian law. The law forbids public officials from interrupting religious worship, as well as any person “notoriously” offending religious feelings during such services or in a place of worship.

The law requires organized religious groups to register with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and with the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) to establish tax-exempt status. Religious groups must submit their articles of faith and bylaws to the SEC in order to register as religious corporations. The SEC requires religious corporations to submit annual financial statements. The law does not specify penalties for failure to register with the SEC. To register as a nonstock, nonprofit organization, religious groups must meet the basic requirements for corporate registration with the BIR and must request tax exemption from the BIR. The basic requirements for registration include a name verification of the religious corporation, articles of incorporation and bylaws, the name of a director, list of members, and a list of financial contributors. The BIR provides tax exemptions to newly established religious corporations that are then reviewed for renewal every three years. The BIR may fine religious corporations for the late filing of registrations or for failing to submit registration datasheets and financial statements.

The government permits religious instruction in public schools with written parental consent, provided there is no cost to the government. Based on a traditional policy of promoting moral education, local public schools give religious groups the opportunity to teach moral values during school hours. Attendance is not mandatory; parents must express in writing a desire for their child to attend religious instruction for a specific denomination, and the various groups share classroom space. Students who do not attend religious instruction because no class was offered in their denomination or because their parents did not express a desire receive normal supervised class time. The government also allows groups to distribute religious literature in public schools. The law mandates that government agencies address religious issues and consult recognized experts on Filipino Muslim beliefs, as well as the history, culture, and identity of indigenous peoples, when formulating the national history curriculum.

By law, public schools must protect the religious rights of students. Muslim girls may wear the hijab and are not required to wear shorts during physical education classes.

The government recognizes sharia in all parts of the country through a presidential decree. Sharia courts are organized into five sharia districts, all located in the south of the country; Muslims residing in other areas must travel to these districts to pursue an action in a sharia court. Sharia courts handle only cases relating to personal laws affecting family relations and property. Sharia does not apply in criminal matters and applies only to Muslims. The state court system hears cases involving Muslims and non-Muslims, and national laws apply in those cases.

The BARMM is a Muslim-led autonomous region established by the central government in January 2019 following the ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law, with jurisdiction over five provinces and three major noncontiguous cities. The Bangsamoro Organic Law provides the framework for the transition to greater autonomy for the area's majority Muslim population.

The NCMF's Bureau of Pilgrimage and Endowment is responsible for administering logistics for the Hajj, such as obtaining flight schedules, administering vaccines, coordinating with the Department of Foreign Affairs to process Hajj passports, filing Hajj visa applications at the Saudi embassy, and conducting predeparture orientations for pilgrims. The NCMF also administers the *awqaf* (an endowment for the upkeep of Islamic properties and institutions) and continues to oversee the establishment and maintenance of Islamic centers and other projects.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Anak Mindinao Party Representative Amihilda Sangcopan strongly condemned the “brutal and monstrous” robbing and killing of Muslim businesswoman Nadia Casar by five policemen and two civilians. Multiple news sources reported that the body was burned. The NCMF stated that the disposal of Casar’s remains violated her faith saying it was “a blatant disregard of the Islamic rituals in handling the dead.” Congressman Mujiv Hataman, Representative of Basilan, stated that Casar’s case was not an isolated instance since there were reports in the past of rogue policemen subjecting Muslims, especially traders in the jewelry business, to abuse, robbery, and killings. The five police involved in the killing of Casar were dismissed and according to the Commission on Human Rights there was an ongoing criminal case at year’s end. Both the NCMF and Hataman urged the government to protect religious minorities following similar incidents in the past year

The human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO) Karapatan stated that seven church workers had been killed for their involvement in human rights work, social justice, and environmental efforts since the Duterte administration began in 2016. In May, an unknown assailant shot and killed a lay minister of Iglesia Filipina Independiente, Briccio “Brix” Nuevo Jr., in Guihulngan City, Negros Oriental after he was “red-tagged” (publicly labelled by government agents or supporters as affiliated with insurgent, terrorist, or separatist groups) by the anticommunist vigilante group Kagubak. Although Kagubak is recognized as an anticommunist vigilante group that has no formal link to the government, the NGO Karapatan-Central Visayas said the killing was part of the government’s “senseless crackdown” on critics and activists.

Karapatan also said that religious organizations and leaders experienced harassment and intimidation, including arbitrary arrests and accusations of links to the Communist Party of the Philippines, charges rights and religious groups described as false. Karapatan stated it believed that many of these individuals were targeted because of their criticism of the government. In June, police arrested UCCP Pastor Benjie Gomez, an advocate for the rights of indigenous groups in Mindanao, following his worship services in Zamboanga del Norte on charges of murder, charges that were initiated in October 2012. At year’s end, Gomez remained detained in Leon Postigo Municipal Police Station. Gomez was also reportedly arrested earlier in 2014 on charges of murder and frustrated (the alleged

victim survived the attack) murder charges stemming from a military engagement between the army and the New People's Army, but the charges were dismissed in 2015 for lack of evidence. Iglesia Filipina Independiente Supreme Bishop Rhee M. Timbang said in a statement in June that Gomez's arrest was a "serious attack to the Church, grave insult to the Christian faith, and a sacrilegious assault against our God." In a July protest, church leaders from various religious groups denounced what they termed the illegal arrests and detention by government authorities of four UCCP pastors, including Gomez. All four pastors were arrested in separate cases, which the religious groups say were based on trumped up charges and planted evidence.

At year's end, two Catholic priests continued to face charges of conspiracy to commit sedition regarding their alleged involvement in the production and release of a 2019 video linking President Rodrigo Duterte and his family to the illicit drug trade.

On February 15, Cebu City police, accompanied by Department of Social Welfare and Development staff, raided a temporary school for displaced indigenous children at the University of San Carlos-Talamban, a Catholic university, and arrested seven adults for allegedly exploiting minors by training child combatants for the armed communist group New People's Army. In what they called a rescue operation, the police also stated they rescued 19 children. Human Rights Watch reported the government repeatedly said that schools of indigenous groups in Mindanao served as a training ground for the New People's Army. Save our Schools Network, a group facilitating education of evacuee children from indigenous groups in Mindanao, reported approximately 178 schools of these groups were closed by the Department of Education since 2016, particularly in Mindanao, forcing affected children to seek education in cities such as Manila and Cebu.

In March, a week after the media-dubbed "Bloody Sunday" attack on activists by security forces in Calabarzon that killed nine people, "red-tagged" Redemptorist priest Father Alex Bercasio received a death threat from unidentified men who threw stones at the Catholic-run Redemptorist Church compound in Laoag City, Ilocos Norte, wrapped with a note saying, "Alex Bercasio, your days are numbered." Bercasio, an advocate of indigenous peoples' rights, had been leading some of the congregation's social action programs in far-flung communities. On July 22, a banner red-tagging the Redemptorists was placed outside of the same Laoag compound. The religious group had been helping individuals and communities in need, including students through college scholarships, as well as

farmers, workers, and indigenous peoples, and extending relief and rehabilitation efforts during calamities.

Following the passage of the Antiterrorism Act of 2020, 103 religious organizations, human rights groups, and private individuals filed a total of 37 petitions questioning the constitutionality of the act. Many religious organizations stated they were fearful that law enforcement agents or military operatives could tag their members as “terrorists” because of their evangelical and missionary work, particularly with the poor and marginalized such as the indigenous peoples of Mindanao, under what religious groups said was a vague definition of terrorism introduced by the act. They also stated it could lead to restraints in the free practice and free expression of their faith. On December 9, the Supreme Court ruled the Antiterrorism Act constitutional except for two provisions. One struck provision allowed the government to arrest protesters if they endanger the public; the court ruled the provision to be overly broad and too easily abused. The second allowed the government to consider someone a terrorist solely based on determinations by the UN Security Council, without the need for the government to make its own determination. The petitioners and other human rights groups said, however, that the ruling still did not provide protection to the Filipino people and the law remained only “mostly constitutional.”

Mass gatherings, including religious ones, were prohibited or limited during certain levels of community quarantine implemented nationwide under legislation passed in March 2020 that granted special powers to the President to manage the COVID-19 outbreak. In March, during Holy Week, Catholic Bishop of Caloocan Pablo Virgilio David expressed frustration regarding the government’s continued intermittent banning of religious gatherings despite its allowing gyms and spas to operate on a limited capacity for two weeks as part of its measures taken during a surge of COVID-19 cases in Metro Manila and nearby provinces. David, also the vice president of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, said that such restrictions were a violation of religious freedom. NCCP Secretary General Bishop Reuel Norman Marigza also criticized the government decision to limit religious gatherings without sufficient consultations with the churches and individuals. Other NCCP churches made similar statements.

During the year, after limited religious gatherings began to be allowed toward the end of 2020, minority religious groups raised concerns that the government prioritized the reopening of Catholic Church religious facilities over those of minority religious groups. They said the government allowed Catholic gatherings

to have a higher maximum occupancy limit once churches were reopened for services.

President Duterte did not criticize or use profanity towards the Catholic Church during the year, a shift from previous years. During the June launch of the “Global Coalition of Lingkod Bayan Advocacy Support Groups and Force Multipliers,” a new group of volunteers aimed at helping the government enforce laws, President Duterte admitted to criticizing the Catholic Church in the past but said that he did not quarrel with “individual priests or the lay workers who work for God.” The coalition is said to have members from various religious groups.

Religious groups such as the Philippine Faith-based Organization Forum (PFOF) criticized the surveillance and questioning by police of faith-based organizers of humanitarian initiatives, such as community pantries. These pantries were set up to distribute food and other essentials during the COVID-19 community quarantine. In April, the PFOF reported an “unwanted series of visits and inappropriate questioning” of Fr. Edwin Gariguez, a Roman Catholic priest and former executive secretary of Caritas Philippines (a humanitarian, development, and advocacy organization sponsored by the Catholic Church) and Rev. Glofie Baluntong, superintendent of the United Methodist Church-Mindoro District, during relief and development activity they were conducting with communities in Mindoro. The PFOF also reported similar incidents of surveillance, threats, and red-tagging of religious leaders in Central Luzon and Ilocos Norte, saying there was a “climate of suspicion and surveillance among humanitarian and church workers.”

On February 18, *AsiaNews.it* reported that the government cancelled the permanent resident visa of Dutch Catholic missionary Otto Rudolf De Vries and ordered him to leave the country within 30 days. The government said he was involved in “illegal political activities,” including participating in protests led by the Ecumenical Institute for Labor Education and Research and the Kilusang Mayo Uno labor center which, the expulsion order stated, were connected to the underground communist movement. De Vries stated he had no opportunity to protest the order.

On March 12, the Anti-Money Laundering Council ordered a freeze of three bank accounts of the UCCP Home and Altar for Renewal, Action, and Nurture (Haran) center in Davao City, a refuge for displaced indigenous people from Mindanao, for what the council stated was financing terrorism. The NCCP condemned the order, saying such an act was a “direct assault on the ministry of UCCP and would further

put in danger the lives of the internally displaced indigenous people from Mindanao who sought refuge in Haran.” This, it said, violated UCCP’s right to exercise freedom of religion by preventing the ministry from helping its “neighbors.” The National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict had earlier red-tagged UCCP Haran as a “center of propaganda, education, and recruitment” by communist rebels.

The Office of the President, through its Office of the Presidential Adviser for Religious Affairs, held an interfaith prayer meeting in May entitled “Whole Nation Pray as One, Heal as One” for nationwide recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The virtual gathering was attended by representatives of religious denominations in the country, including the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, World Evangelical Alliance, Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches, the NCCP, and Iglesia ni Cristo.

The Department of Education continued to support its Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education (ALIVE) program for Muslim students in private madrassahs and public elementary schools with a Muslim population of 10 percent or more. For the 2020-21 school year, 1,124 public elementary schools administered the voluntary ALIVE program for 124,687 students, compared with 1,686 schools and 146,418 students during the 2019-20 school year. The decrease in the number of learners was attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as to the implementation of the Bangsamoro Organic Law, which states that the Bangsamoro Government shall exercise authority on education in areas within the BARMM. The program aims to integrate madrassahs into the public education system while preserving Islamic education for Muslim Filipinos.

Madrassahs continued to have the option of registering with the NCMF or the Department of Education, both, or neither. Registered madrassahs received government funding and produced curricula that were subject to government oversight. The Department of Education did not provide updates during the year. There were 19 private madrassahs registered with the Department of Education during the 2021-2022 school year, down from 85 in 2018-19. The Department of Education attributed the decrease in the number of registered private madrassahs to the implementation of the Bangsamoro Organic Law because the majority of private madrassahs were located within the BARMM and were not included in this count. Additionally, some private madrassahs chose to remain unregistered rather than allow government oversight, according to Department of Education representatives.

The Department of Education's Office of Madrassah Education managed local and international financial assistance to the private madrassah system. By law, only registered schools or madrassahs could receive financial assistance from the government. Madrassahs registered by the Department of Education followed the Standard Madrassah Curriculum and received funding for classrooms, facilities, and educators who taught the Revised Basic Education Curriculum. The Department of Education did not provide updates during the year. The overall funding for and attendance at private madrassahs continued to decrease from 2020 to 2021 due to the implementation of the Bangsamoro Organic Law, which created the BARMM and created a separate BARMM budget for the region's education. Since most of the country's madrassahs were located in the BARMM, the Department of Education had far fewer madrassahs to cover with the Department's budget. During the year, the total madrassah education budget was 346,830,000 pesos (\$6.8 million), of which the Department of Education provided 13,130,000 pesos (\$257,000) to 2,626 private madrassah students.

NCMF officials said that anti-Muslim discrimination continued to occur in government offices. In June, NCMF received a report from a Muslim woman who was asked to remove her hijab before posing for a photo for her National Identification (ID) card application. The NCMF wrote to the PSA requesting the issuance of a memorandum allowing headscarves to be worn for National ID photo registration purposes, to which the PSA responded that it had policies and guidelines giving special considerations for religious norms. Some Muslim leaders continued to express concern about the low percentage of Muslims in senior government and military positions. Similar to the previous year, there were 13 Muslims in the 304-member House of Representatives, but no Muslims in the 24-member Senate. There was one Muslim member of the cabinet, the head of the NCMF, and President Duterte appointed Muslims to a small number of senior positions, such as commissioner of the Social Security System, member of the Board of Directors of the Cooperation Development Authority, and undersecretary at the Department of Agriculture.

The PSA estimated that during the year, 40 percent of a total of five million unregistered residents were children who were 14 or younger, primarily among Muslim and indigenous groups. Since citizenship derives from birth to a citizen parent, the government initiated a pilot program in Metropolitan Manila that provided undocumented Muslim Filipinos with an identity card – the Muslim Filipino Identity Card. The government said the card was intended to help them access services, since many in this population did not have a birth certificate. Sources stated that the lack of a birth certificate did not generally result in a denial

of education or other services, but it could cause delays in some circumstances. Under the pilot program, undocumented individuals could use the secondary identification when applying for jobs, schools, and for other government services in lieu of a birth certificate or formal registry. The NCMF noted that this secondary identification also helped overseas Filipino workers who found themselves in precarious labor situations. If their employers confiscated their passports, having a secondary form of identification could speed the foreign government's citizenship assessment, thus providing fast repatriation services. Critics had expressed reservations about the potential for abuse in similar initiatives in the past.

Muslim officials continued to report that while Muslim prison detainees were allowed to engage in religious observances, Roman Catholic Mass was often broadcast by loudspeaker to both Catholic and non-Catholic prison populations.

Actions of Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

The government attributed several threats, attacks, and kidnappings in the south of the country to the Maute Group and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) – both of which are designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. government – as well as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and other ISIS-related groups. In September, individuals described by the military and local officials as BIFF terrorists wounded eight individuals when an improvised explosive device was set off in a town plaza in Datu Piang, Maguindanao. Datu Piang mayor Victor Samama said he was convinced the bombing was perpetrated by the same BIFF members who stormed the town in December 2020 and burned a police car while firing at the police station. The government continued sustained military, law enforcement, and counterterrorism operations against the Maute Group, ASG, and other ISIS-related groups.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to media reports, a group of unknown gunmen killed Catholic priest Rene Bayang Regalado on January 24 in Malaybalay, Bukidnon Province. The national police chief of the province, Colonel Roel Lami-Ing, said the motive for the killing may have been retaliation for the priest's activism against illegal logging and advocacy for farmers' rights, or connected to allegations of rape made against him in 2020. At year's end, police had not taken any suspects into custody.

Violent incidents, particularly in rural areas in the south of the country where Muslims comprise the majority of the population, were frequently associated with interclan *rido* (feud) violence. Since religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, incidents were difficult to classify as solely based on religious identity. In April, the town of Talitay, Maguindanao declared a state of calamity due to armed conflicts related to feuds that displaced 3,500 individuals.

Social media comments denigrating the beliefs or practices of Muslims continued to appear during the year.

During the March launch of the Task Force Bantay Bangsamoro, an NGO consisting of various human rights groups and Muslim organizations to promote the rights of the Moro people, Anak Mindanao party-list Representative Amihilda Sangcopan stated that Muslims continued to face discrimination and human rights violations in the country. Task force member Muhamad Ali Macalbas of the Moro Human Rights Defender Network said that young Moro professionals experienced discrimination in the workplace and that some job interviews had been cut short when potential employers learned the applicants were Muslim. Sangcopan further noted that the task force was created to guarantee that the rights and dignities of the Muslims were respected and observed. She reported a rising incidence of enforced or involuntary disappearances among Muslims, particularly in Metro Manila. The NCMF and other sources stated, however, that they were unaware of a rising incidence of these disappearances.

On February 22, *United Catholic News* reported that unknown individuals vandalized several Catholic churches in Lamitan City, Basilan Province. The vandalism included removing the heads from statues and damaging other religious items. Bishop of Basilan Leo Dalmao stated the damage likely occurred in order to “sow fear and confusion” among Catholics and Muslims in the Mindanao region.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The embassy conducted a broad range of engagement throughout the year with the government to highlight the importance of international religious freedom. Embassy officers regularly met with the Commission on Human Rights to discuss general human rights issues in the country, including the red-tagging of religious figures, particularly priests and pastors.

The embassy and its civil society organization partners engaged local governments in the Lanao region to invest in community learning facilities that served as venues

for cooperation and inclusive dialogues, including on religious freedom. An embassy-sponsored project worked with local organizations in sensitizing community leaders about female empowerment from diverse perspectives, including religious and ethnic group viewpoints that encouraged tolerance and pluralism.

The embassy continued to use online platforms and virtual engagement to emphasize strong U.S. support for religious freedom and the protection of civil liberties for persons of all faiths, including highlighting subjects such as the freedom to worship and the importance of religious tolerance.

The embassy supported youth-led community activities involving teachers and young students of madrassahs that included messages on religious tolerance and building social bonds with students outside the madrassah system.

In May, the embassy commemorated Ramadan with speakers from different faith-based traditions in Southeast Asia with a month-long virtual interfaith dialogue series on reducing the influence of violent extremism related to religion within local communities. The dialogue, which drew influential leaders from the government, civil society, and religious groups, included a virtual iftar hosted by the embassy. The dialogue also dealt with how to promote religious freedom. In Mindanao, former participants of U.S. government-sponsored exchange programs hosted an in-person iftar in Cagayan de Oro City and distributed food to madrassah students displaced by the 2017 Marawi City siege – a five-month-long armed conflict between the government and the ISIS-affiliated Maute group.

During the year, 120 youth council leaders and 60 religious leaders from Sulu Archipelago and Zamboanga Peninsula joined virtual projects that encouraged participants to advocate for religious tolerance in their communities. Implemented by a local youth-led NGO, the projects introduced the participants to different community activities that encouraged mutual respect and tolerance regardless of religious and cultural affiliation.